

Womanism: A critical Search of Ethiopian Lore on Sex, Race and Class through Tsegaye Gebre Medhin's literary works

Abstract

The purpose of this research is expressing womanism instead of the pop feminism. This qualitatively conducted research will deal with Ethiopian lore on Womanism. A hundred years aged feminism; was recognized by scholars as a study, method, and philosophy of sex. The actual concern of feminism is only sexism; feminists identify men as their enemy. That means feminism can be seen as a separationist. The latest conception, Womanism aims at concerning sexism, classism, and racism.

The very nature of feminism falls on advocating women's rights based on sex equality. It comes to the arena through three waves. On the contrary, the nature of Womanism falls on questing class stratifications, race categorizations and sex orders. This means Womanism seems more organic than feminism is and this organically is blacks' wisdom as this research elaborates.

Again it is true, that Womanism is an Ethiopian based lore as we can refer from the preliminary literary works of this research; *Tewodros, Minilik, Petros yachin seat, Enatalem tenu, Hahu besidisit wor, Ha Hu Pe Pu* of Tsegaye Gebre Medhin. This research will argue that Womanism is an Ethiopian lore as it can be manifested through these literary works. In addition to mentioned plays of Tsegaye poems are selected to be reviewed in search of Ethiopian lore on Womanism. Viz. *Esat woy abeba, Manew minitis, Abren zim enbel, Hiwot birabiro, and Meshe degmo amba liwta.*

Key Words: Tsegaye, womanism, Feminism

Introduction

The literary works that I will analyze are Tsegaye's six plays; viz. *Tewodros*, *Minilik*, *Petros yachin seat*, *Enatalem tenu*, *Hahu besides it wor*, *Ha Hu Pe Pu*. In addition to the mentioned plays of Tsegaye, poems are selected to be reviewed in search of Ethiopian lore on Womanism, off these *Esat woy abeba*, *Manew minitis*, *Abren zim enbel*, *Hiwot birabiro*, and *Meshe degmo amba liwta*.

Generally, the research aims to achieve its goals by analyzing Tsegaye's literary work. Before going to the analysis part I will review the conception of the philosophy of gender. After having a brief review of the conception I will pass on to the discussion part. At that level, I will describe three approaches of Tsegaye's womanism. This article will be accompanied by a reference list.

On sex

For Kant, In "Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View" women compared to men, are dominated by sense rather than reason. Their rational part, which they possess as human beings, is controlled by their sensuality. Their sensuality is manifested in their "timid" characteristic and "lack of self-determination." As a result, they persistently need men for protection.

Similar, but by far cruel and extensive, exposition is made also by Schopenhauer. In "On Women," he sees women as shrewd creatures that compensate their lack of overall strength and weaker power of reasoning by deception and using everything as a means.

The centuries of disdain for the nature of women is met by a furious reaction in modern times. Though the categorization of the responses is elusive, it can be divided into two. The libertarians' reaction aims at social, legal, and political reformation as a resolution for the long lasting oppression of women. The more radical approach, on the other hand, does not regard political and social reformation as sufficient. They, instead aim at changing the whole patriarchal system, extending from challenging social and religious institutions to questioning the very idea of designating women solely based on nature (Rosmerie 2009:1.)

In her famous book "Vindication of the Rights for Women," Wollstonecraft argues that women are not naturally gentle, weak, humble, kind, or emotional, rather they are made to be so.

Passing from Wollstonecraft's questioning of the supposed feminine nature to Mill's "agnosticism" on nature itself, we arrive at Simon De Beauvoir's rejection of essentialism. In "The Second Sex" she argues that no psychological physiological, or even economic fact, has determined and caused the nature ascribed and status given to women. She writes, "One is not born, but rather, become a woman" (De Beauvoir 1976:267.)

Moreover, De Beauvoir regards even the distinction between the two sexes as vague. Certain men owing to their delay in the development of their sexual organ, take up a feminine aspect, whereas some girls, "under the influence of male hormone," become what is called "viriloids." (Ibid:398) So, not only gender, but also sex is invented and conventional than natural.

And as a resolution De Beauvoir calls for transcendence. This transcendence, unlike Wollstonecraft and Mill which is of political and social sort, is sexual as well. It is transcending their body, and the nature that is ascribed to them through identifying them in terms of their body. If women have to assert their subjectivity, denying the "otherness" and objectivity given to them by men, transcendence is crucial. This denial of the objectified status women are rendered hitherto, and affirmation of her as a subject as much as the man, doesn't entail treating men as objects in the reverse. Instead, transcendence demands reciprocity. As much as she encroaches in his world, he encroaches in hers (Ibid:684.)

Tsegaye's womanism

The First Model: The Way of Truth and Hope Thesis

Tsegaye in his works says a lot about the nature and nurture of women. In his works we can see that when Tsegaye fights with culture, he fights with illiteracy, fights with different people, even sometimes he fights with himself to idealize women. The next three poems can be used as good examples of Tsegaye's conflict with culture, with women, and with himself respectively *Abren zim enbel*, *Esat woy Abeba*, and *Meshe Degimo Amba Liwuta*.

Tsegaye, who endeavored to tackle the oppression of women due to cultural and economic biases, engaged in exposing and countering this oppression. He wrote what his view is towards women in the above poem because he knows how much women are suffering from due to lack of respect, unheard voice, and gossip. And they are silent about all these.

Even though the philosopher is concerned about the problem related to women as a poet and a playwright he sometimes gets exhausted. While the politician enjoys doing over and over the same action, the poet finds it tiring. The next extraction can show this, Tsegaye looks for something new, from himself and from the woman he is speaking to. But he couldn't live up to it and didn't meet his expectations.

He knows he and the woman are the fruits of their culture, environment, economy and spiritual life. He calls the woman to have or to create a peaceful time by forming silence. On the other hand, he acknowledges the hardness of avoiding traditional influences simply. That is why he said 'We are not permitted for discussion' in his poem *Esat woy abeba*.

The other basic point under Tsegaye's way of truth and hope model is that, like De Beauvoir, Tsegaye finds women responsible for their oppressions. To look it in example when Tsegaye portrayed a poor woman as the mother of the great emperor Tewodros, he knows that even women will (may) stand in the position of affirming the oppression.

Even Tsegaye writes regretting like the (ባከነች ልጅ ታችን እየቃተን ስናነባ) since his view on women is the lifetime project he didn't withdraw from it as we can understand from his works. He didn't give up on his central thought, of advocating optimal depiction of women. Empress Tewabech the wife of Tewodros and Empress Taytu the wife of Minilik, for instance, are Tsegaye's reason to dwell more on his portrayal of women. The same iconic women fight against the hegemonies of men and struggle for the rights of women.

Tsegaye knows that even if there are women who cooperate with the androgenic system, also there are women who fight for his way of truth and hope. Tewabech who has a blood share with empress Mintwab acknowledge that a nameless poor woman can bear an emperor. Also Tewabech condemn her mother for her negatively oriented thought towards the nature of women. That is why she says: 'እውነትን ካንች ማምደም ለኝ.. ማምደም ለኝ' (ገ ጽ 63)

Tsegaye brings out his deep feelings, and his feelings are to preach the way of truth and hop, which means about women. No one is able to live without women, because of this; even people may think that they are able to live lonely without women it will be artificial. Accordingly, the character in the poem is confessing that even if he thought he can live without a woman, that is not truth, and the way of that truth was women.

And the poem can show us the central tenet of Tsegaye's argument. The general tone of the poem is the following. As he says, "In traditional, theological, and cultural thoughts I learned

to think of women as inferior. They taught me that a woman is the cause of sin. I was told she is a sinner, and that she caused me to be too. They told me that leaving the woman was a blessing. But I couldn't separate from them; I am with you day and night, from crawling to bending. I always visit the hill.”¹ For Tsegaye truth is women. That is why he wrote;

አግዳ ወጥቼ እኩል-ሌሊት ስለትገብኜ በስሜ
ከርዋሳይጣ በእሷ አስቸኝ ልገላገል ከሀሞሁ

As we can see from the above lines, the cause of his sickness is she and she is the cure too. The unrealistic story in this sense is the androcentric ideology, and Satan is the culture, religion, and the like. As I have discussed above, this system preaches women as sinners and to some extent the holiness of men. To understand this it is important to look at the norms and ethics in Abraham's family² religions. That is how the system is oppressive to women.

So for Tsegaye, the way of truth lies not in religion. Culture too is not the source of truth. For Tsegaye, we find the way of truth neither in religion nor in culture; but through women. Women are not only the way of truth. But these are the ways of hope that every person longs for.

In the above lines of the poem, Tsegaye wants to advocate that he is not a complete man without a woman. The poet believes that women are the ways of hope. Hope is something that we cling to even at a time when we have nothing. Accordingly, for Tsegaye women are ways to hope that we are longing at each moment. Since women are ways of hope, and there is no life without hope, there is no life without women. So we can say that women are ways to reach the fact that Tsegaye put as truth and hope, whatsoever these truth and hope are.

The Second Model: The Incomparability Thesis

When we see his second model of thought, as it is shown in his works, Tsegaye believes that women are not comparable with men. This is not because of inferiority or superiority; instead, this is because the nature of women is different from the nature of men. For Tsegaye women have different nature in contrast with men. The argument for this model of thought can be found in his works implicitly and explicitly. In the play “Tewodros” we find a claim that states;

¹Hill in the tradition of Orthodox Christianity is a holy place to pray or in other word it is church.

²Judaism, Christianity and Islam

ከህ ለጦር ጅምቶቹ የብረት ማር ተዋቅቶ ግን ለወታደሩ ሁሉ የማፈሰስ ክር ነበረች፡ በሙሉም ሁሉ ያልተለየችን የጦር አበባ ረቂቅ ተዋቅቶ የልቦችን ወላጅ አርማደንገት ያጠቃልላል፡ ማዳ ለደህ እናቴ ምክንያት የብረት ማር ሰላት የነበረች ተዋቅቶ ተቀጥረች፡ ከተዋቅቶ ጋር ማፈሰስ ብርሃናችን ከሙስ ያይደል ጋር የማፈሰስ አደባባሪን እያደረ ዳማ (ገጽ፡ 81)

As Tsegaye insists women have a special and unique nature. That special nature helps them to be lights, to be a spiritual strength, to be lights of passion, to be a way of getting bliss, to be the answer to the question on the meaning of life. Because of their nature, women can appease man’s rage; because of their nature, women can make men able to open up their minds. In all selected plays and poems women are portrayed as cures to all kinds of problems.

He wrote that the meaning of *Etie* in the Shewa community means sister as well as goddess; empress but also mother. Then the emperor continues; you my all (*Etie*) got my sickness it is at the center of my abdomen.³

Unlike other playwrights and poets, Tsegaye goes beyond narration or dialogue. He argues for his philosophical view in a coherent manner in his plays and poems which is why he writes a lot about the different nature of women in his literary works. When Tsegaye stated that women have a different nature than men, it is by showing the natural differences. As we have seen above, women are capable of creating emotional maturity. When Tewodros gets angry, Tewabech appeases him. According to Tsegaye man cannot stand alone. Women are an essential part of anyone’s life.

One can be rich, can be a hero, can be a holy person, or whatever. But he needs the support of women to be successful in his path. Tewodros wouldn’t become who he was, if not for Tewabech. Minilik is not “Emye Minilik” without Taytu. For Tsegaye, even the holy bishop Abuna Petros is not without women.

Tsegaye believes that women are the stream of life, the source of strength, endurance, and soul. This is in a clear contradiction with Aristotle who claimed that women are only the source of the material part of human beings.⁴

Abuna Petros was considered to be a bishop; it is believed that he has a spiritual power that could enable him to talk to God directly. He could ask God whatever he wants God to give

³May be in his heart?

⁴In chapter two we have seen that, Aristotle believe that women are emotional and the source of material part of human being, rather men are souls of human beings and are able to use their mind.

him. I believe that Tsegaye introduces this scene intentionally to show that women are the way of hope and truth. Throughout his works, he argues that women and men can't be compared, rather they are complementary and are parts that make the whole. Moreover, this argument seems to state that comparing the nature of the two sexes by itself is wrong.

To strengthen this argument let me quote one more example from the works of Tsegaye. The main character of the play '*Minilik*' is emperor Minilik himself. As he is portrayed in the play, Minilik is a powerful and wise emperor. Throughout the play, we can see that Minilik has a special place for women. Minilik does and decides nothing without consulting women, at least his wife, Taytu. When we see the historical scene of the battle of Adewa, it is not only Minilik's craft that is salient. But the battle is won with the shrewdness of Taytu and with the supposed spirit of St. Mary. We can see this from the lines in the play "Minilik:"

This has a similar tone to Abune Petros's lines. From these two extractions, we can conclude that Tsegaye believes that women are the strength and spiritual power of men; whether the man is powerful (materially or spiritually) or not, he cannot be full without women. This is Tsegaye's second thesis.

The Third Model: The incommensurability thesis

As Tsegaye argues the two genders have their own identity, and comparing them is not possible. As a result, we cannot say this sex is superior and that is inferior, or even we cannot say the two are equal. The only thing that we can say is that these two genders are different but alike in their ontological status and complementary.

In the literary works of Tsegaye women and men are regarded as having different, but complementary, natures. In Tewodros the physical passion, the physical activities, and the 'hard skills' are done by emperor Tewodros. And the 'soft skills' like emotional empowerment, love, consulting, peacemaking, and the like activities are done by Tewabech.

The same goes for the story of Menilik. In Minilik, the relationship and interaction between Taytu and Minilik is alike with that of Tewodros and Tewabech. This kind of dichotomy seems positive, but not actually for me. We can see this as follows;

Tsegaye's gender-based stratification states that women should be assigned soft skills like emotional empowerment, loving and child-rearing. And men should be assigned for hard skills like warfare. If we are employing the terminology computers, the hardware and

software of computers, it resembles be optimal. This is because there is no computer without software. But if we are proposing examples based on human skills it will fall.

It seems that if Tsegaye believes that women should be assigned the so-called 'soft skills' and men the 'hard 'skills, his optimal will be negative. Many feminists like De Beauvoir are against the assignment of women to activities that require shallow reasoning and emotional involvement such as child caring, housemaid and secretary.

What did I mean? For example, if we accept Tsegaye's dichotomy totally, it means that there will not be female engineers, soldiers, politicians, or administrators, and soon. Anyway, let us go through Tsegaye's depictions of women to have more understanding of this dichotomy.

In *Petros yachin Se'at* we find a similar theme. As the man Petros carries the physical burden, the suffering, the hunger, and other ups and downs; *Emberhan*, the mother of Jesus carries his spiritual burden.

We can see that when Abuna Petros prays to transfer his spiritual burden to her. And in *Hahu Besidist wor Semu Nigus* is seen suffering because of several things. He was working in a rural area, where it is mandatory to pass rivers, and mountains, and walk long distances. Besides, hunger and lack of clean water are there. Making the most complex dialogues with the community to convince them and to transmit modern education is also a challenge for Semu Nigus. After passing this, in the play we see Semu becoming insane for many reasons.

Semu knew that he couldn't make a difference for the people who were suffering from hunger, sickness, and ignorance. At last, he blames and condemns himself, and then he loses his mind. In the same way, Tikile is also suffering from many spiritual reasons. She thinks about truth, equality, spirituality, and dignity.

Conclusion

For Tsegaye the nature of the two sexes is different, and this nature makes men dependent on women, as women are on men. In fact, for Tsegaye, the two sexes are compatible and complementary. The uncultured, the emotional, the aggressive, the threatened, and the frustrated man is always dependent on women to be peaceful, cool, and appeasing. And

unfortunately, no man can stay out of this condition, even for a single moment of his life. According to Tsegaye, this applies to all men, soldiers, princes, emperors, pop, priests or whatsoever sort of man. As we can note from his literary works, the laureate argues the dependency of men on women by delineating women as ways of hope and truth. Also, this natural dichotomy gives us a line to apprehend their uniqueness. Referring to Tsegaye's works, comparing the incomparable natures may lead us to say they are equal or unequal. But as I said before, this kind of judgment is a mechanical explanation for Tsegaye. The thesis of this paper is that Tsegaye's works contain philosophical views, on the depiction of women. And I have demonstrated and argued for my thesis by making a literary analysis of his works. And the literary analysis of his works is my claim and evidence to my claim that Tsegaye has a better portrayal of women.

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